Late Intervention

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To help struggling readers, schools and teachers often focus on early intervention. To be sure, early intervention has been shown to be effective in many situations. But educators can also achieve great success by paying attention to late intervention, and late intervention is done best when it consists of massive "free voluntary reading."

Free Voluntary Reading

Free voluntary reading means reading because you want to: No book reports, no comprehension questions, and feeling free to put the book down when it is not right for you. It is the kind of reading nearly all literate adults do all the time.

There is overwhelming evidence that free voluntary reading is effective in developing literacy. When such programs operate for a sufficient period of time and when interesting reading material is available, students who participate typically outperform students who don't participate on tests of reading comprehension. Correlational studies confirm that that those who do more free reading read better, write better, spell better, have better grammatical competence, and have larger vocabularies (McQuillan, 1998; Krashen, 1997, 2004).

For free reading to work, readers need to have easy access to books. Those with more access to books read more, and those who read more, read better. But access is a serious problem for children living in poverty: They have fewer books in the home, live in communities with inferior public libraries, and attend schools with inferior classroom and school libraries. (Krashen, 1997, McQuillan, 1998; Krashen, 2004).

Much research evidence and many individual cases support the view that late intervention based on free reading can work, that there is no "critical period" for learning to read, and that improvement in literacy can occur at any age.

Countries That Start Later

Elley (1992) studied reading ability in 32 countries, and found that " … countries which begin instruction in reading at age seven have largely caught up with the 5- and 6-year old starters in reading ability by age nine" (p. 37). Table 1 presents reading test scores for 9-year olds in four countries in which reading instruction began at age 7. Clearly, students who were introduced to reading after age 7 had average reading scores above the norm by age 9.

Table 1: Reading Scores at Age Nine for Countries in which Reading Instruction began at Age Seven

	score	rank	Econ. Dev.	bks in home
Finland	569	1	5	135
Sweden	539	3	2	174
Norway	524	7	3	157
Iceland	518	8	4	118

From: Elley (1994)
Bks: average number of books in the home
Econ. Dev.: calculated from GNP, expenditures for education, life expectancy and other variables
Mean reading score for all 32 countries = 500

Note that Finland, Sweden, Norway and Iceland all rank among the highest in the world in economic development. All four reported that their communities have a plentiful supply of books in homes and school libraries, and that public libraries and bookstores were available to students. Elley's findings suggest that a late start is not a problem when children have access to reading materials.

Cases of Home-Schooled Children

Learning to read late did not prevent many eminent people from reaching the highest levels of literacy. Einstein is reported to have learned to read at age 9, Rodin at 10 and Woodrow Wilson at 11 (Schulman, 1986). In addition to these famous cases, there are also accounts of home-schooled children who learned to read late and with little or no formal instruction.

Mason (1993a) reports that her daughter, K.M., "could not/did not want to read" at eight and a half. Having tried earlier to push her to learn math, and finding that the pressure made her "hate arithmetic," Mason decided not to intervene on reading. Then it happened: Around her ninth birthday, "she began to read and two months later she could read at the level of her literate friends. Then she extended her reading, and now (age 15) she reads the way very literate adults do" (p. 28).

Mason (1993b) describes the case of her son, D.M.. The summer D.M. was 10, Mason reports, he could only read a word or two. In the fall, according to his mother, D.M. began "to read store signs and notices with a vengeance … (One night) sometime past midnight, he read his way through a fat Spiderman annual his older brother Luke gave him for his birthday" (p. 11).

D.M. also began reading the sports page of the local newspaper. One day, Mason took D.M. to the local science museum, where he began to read aloud "long paragraphs of technical writing discussing 'atmospheric conditions' and 'helium gases in the stratosphere'" (p. 11).

H.K. (Kerman, 1993) was reading at a "bare Cat in the Hat level" at the age of 10 and a half. Her mother reports:

"During the course of the next year, she did learn the basics about reading, although I shall never know how, since she refused instruction as much as always. We continued to read out-loud to her, and she rarely read to herself. My main consolation was that she loved books and didn't think badly of herself. At the age of 14, she started to read Scott O'Dell's books. The first one took her two months to read. Two months later, she was reading full-length adult fantasy novels … She reads voraciously now at the age of 16" (p. 27).

These cases have several features in common: Little or no formal instruction was required, the parents put no pressure on the child, and all of the children made rapid progress once they began reading material they were genuinely interested in of their own volition. Finally, all had the advantage of having access to a great deal of reading material.

More Breakthroughs Through High-Interest Reading

Recovered Dyslexics

Another set of cases of readers who started late but caught up through voluntary reading comes from Fink (1995/6). Fink studied 12 people who were considered dyslexic when young who all became "skilled readers." Nine of the 12 had published creative scholarly works and one was a Nobel laureate. Eleven out of these people reported that they finally learned to read between the ages of 10 and 12 (p. 273), and one did not learn to read until the 12th grade.

According to Fink, these readers had a great deal in common: "As children, each had a passionate personal interest, a burning desire to know more about a discipline that required reading. Spurred by this passionate interest, all read voraciously, seeking and reading everything they could get their hands on about a single intriguing topic."

Malcolm X

The case of Malcolm X confirms that reading in areas of interest can cause profound literacy development well beyond elementary school age. Malcolm X had early success in school and was president of his 7th-grade class. As he recounted in his autobiography, his life in the streets, however, "erased everything I'd learned in school" (El-Shabbazz, 1964, p. 154). In prison, in his early twenties, he describes his literacy level as very low. The change came in prison, through massive reading: "Many who hear me today somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I've said, will think I went to school far beyond the 8th grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies … In every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading in my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge …" (p. 171-173).

Malcolm X gave reading the credit: “Not long ago, an English writer telephoned me from London, asking questions. One was, ‘What’s your alma mater?’ I told him, ‘Books’” (p. 179).

The Success of Self-Selected Reading Programs

The success of in-school, self-selected reading programs provides clear evidence that late intervention through free reading works.In these programs, a certain amount of time is set aside for students to do self-selected reading, and accountability is either non-existent or very low.

Sustained silent reading and related programs have been put to the test many times. When compared to students to traditional language arts or English as a second language classes, those in self-selected reading classes do at least as well and very often better on tests of reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing.

For in-school reading programs to work, several common-sense conditions need to be met. The most crucial conditions are that students have sufficient access to interesting reading material and that the program lasts a sufficient amount of time: Those that last for longer than an academic year are consistently successful (Krashen, 2001) . Of interest to us is the finding that in-school free reading works with all age groups tested so far, including university students (Lee, 2005; Liu, 2005; Mason and Krashen, 1997).

One clear case of success is a summer reading program designed for 6th graders with low reading proficiency in California (Shin and Krashen, 2007). The participants read whatever they liked for two 40-minute sessions a day, discussed books with their peers, had individual conferences with teachers, and participated in group discussion of selected novels, such as *The Island of the Blue Dolphins.*

This program clearly met the conditions for successful late intervention: Students had time to read and access to interesting books. The school library collection and classroom collections had been strengthened enormously, and special attention was paid to procuring books the students were sure to enjoy, such as Goosebumps.

Comparison children followed a standard language arts curriculum during the summer. The groups made equivalent gains on the Nelson-Denny vocabulary test, but the children in the voluntary reading group did far better on the Nelson-Denny reading comprehension measure, gaining well over one year after only five and a half weeks of reading. They also gained about five months on the Altos test of reading comprehension and vocabulary, while comparisons declined slightly.

Objections

Several objections have been raised to the simple solution of massive voluntary reading:

1. Poor readers don’t read well enough to read on their own.

2. Poor readers don't like to read.
3. If readers read whatever they like to read, they will read only junk.

Each of these objections can be refuted.

Poor Readers **Can** *Read on their Own?*

Constance Juel's study of poor and good readers (Juel, 1994), often cited as an example of the importance of early intervention, actually provides indirect evidence that late intervention can work. Juel found that poor readers in grade 1 still read below grade level in grade 4, reading at the 3.5 level, based on the ITBS Reading Comprehension Test. However, these poor readers could still read well enough to read many interesting texts. Some comic books are written at the 2nd grade level, and a few of the Goosebumps series are written at the 3rd grade level.

Reluctant Readers and Home Run Books

Juel reported that the poor readers she studied disliked reading; one child, in fact, told Juel, 'I'd rather clean the mold around the bathtub than read.' (p. 442). Even with obvious access to books, some children will not read. Pack (2000) described a group of "library latch-key" children, children whose parents used the public library as a free source of child care after school. Despite the presence of so many books, some of children never read, but spent their time "hanging out" with other children or using library computers.

There are ways to deal with reluctant readers: In addition to increasing access to books, there is evidence that seeing other people read encourages reading (for example, Wheldall and Entwhistle, 1988), reading aloud to children helps (for example, Brassell, 2003), and, of course, providing time for reading, as in sustained silent reading, helps: Children who participate in sustained silent reading classes read more outside of school than do comparison children after the program ends, after the program ends, even years later (Greaney and Clarke, 1973).

Direct encouragement also works, if done right. Carlsen and Sherrill (1988) describe cases in which readers happily followed suggestions from teachers and librarians that led to successful reading experiences. In every case, the suggestions were right for the reader -- not only interesting, but also compelling. In every case, the reader was capable of doing the reading, and in every case the suggestion was a suggestion and the reader had free choice, as in this example:

"After I made several trips to the library, Miss B became aware of the interest in horses that had grown in me and recommended book after book on horses for me to read. I went through all of Walter Farley's books as well as every other book on horses that the library owned" (p. 113).

In cases in which encouragement didn't work, the conditions were not met:

"The librarian … always tried to interest my friend and me in books that had won Newbery prizes or books of exceptional quality for our age bracket. At the time (grade school), I was more interested in horses, so I generally resisted his efforts … (p. 115).

It may be easier to solve the problem of the reluctant reader than we think. Trelease (2006) suggests that sometimes one positive experience with a book, one "home run book experience" can create a reader. The existence and importance of the home run book was confirmed in a series of studies: More than half of the middle school children interviewed agreed that there was one book that started them off reading (Kim and Krashen, 2000; Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen, 2000; Ujiie and Krashen, 2002). Students' remarks indicated that they really understood what they were asked. One student remembered, "Captain Underpants! That book turned me on, because it was funny and an adventure." (from Von Sprecken et. al., 2000)

Will They Read Only Junk?

There is the concern that if children are allowed to read whatever they want to read, they will stay with easy reading and never progress. This is not a problem.

First, the books children select on their own are sometimes more difficult than the reading material assigned by teachers (Southgate, Arnold and Johnson, 1981). In the summer program for low proficiency 6th graders studied by Shin and Krashen (2007), children selected books that were right for them, at about the 4th grade level, which is exactly where they scored on the pretest given at the beginning of the summer.

Second, even if this were not so, there is no cause for concern. Children who get involved in reading eventually choose what experts had decided were "good books" (Schoonover, 1938) and young readers eventually expand their reading interests as they read more (LaBrant, 1958). Research also tells us that middle school boys who read comic books also read more, and read more books, than those who do not read comics (Ujiie and Krashen, 1996). Light reading appears to be a conduit that makes heavier reading attractive and possible.

The Need for Late Options

Arguments for late intervention are not arguments against early intervention. The current "official" approach to literacy development, however, only recognizes early intervention. Late intervention is not even an option, thanks to policies that discourage in-school free reading programs (National Reading Panel, 2000; but see Krashen, 2001), the false belief that "once a poor reader, always a poor reader," and the fact that little is being done to increase access to books for students from low-income families. But once we give children the time to get interested in reading, and make reading material available, late readers can catch up easily. This can happen anytime.

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